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# An Autograph Manuscript of Robert Burns's "Afton Braes"

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Patrick Scott, "An Autograph Manuscript of Robert Burns's 'Afton Braes'," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 207-214.

# **A NEW AUTOGRAPH MANUSCRIPT OF ROBERT BURNS'S "AFTON BRAES": VARIANTS & THE MANUSCRIPT SEQUENCE<sup>1</sup>**

*Patrick Scott*

Among the songs that Robert Burns wrote for James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, one of the most popular has been that beginning "Flow gently, sweet Afton."<sup>2</sup> In 2013, the University of South Carolina Libraries acquired, as a memorial tribute to the late Prof. G. Ross Roy, an autograph manuscript that has never been available to Burns scholars, though it had been recorded three times at auction, in 1861, in 1979, and most recently in 2013. The purpose of this note is to describe and illustrate the new manuscript, to provide a collation of variants, and to suggest its place in the manuscript sequence relative to other sources. It appears to be the earliest surviving manuscript version of the song.

The Roy Collection manuscript is one of three manuscripts of the song now known that are in Burns's own hand. It was not among the manuscripts known to James Kinsley for his 1968 edition of Burns's *Poems and Songs*, though subsequently, in 1986, its existence was noted, without any location being recorded, based on the 1979 auction record, in the Burns section of the comprehensive *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*.<sup>3</sup>

The manuscript now in the Roy Collection is headed "Afton Braes," rather than "Afton Water," or "Sweet Afton," as in other sources, with the air noted as "Tune Banks of Tay." It is written on one side of a single

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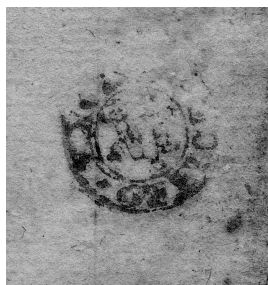
<sup>1</sup> This note incorporates some material originally prepared for the University of South Carolina's formal announcement of this acquisition, in January 2014. The manuscript is reproduced here courtesy of the University of South Carolina Libraries. I am grateful to Elizabeth Sudduth, Director of the Irvin Department, for her interest and collaboration in assembling images and material.

<sup>2</sup> James Johnson, *Scots Musical Museum*, IV (Edinburgh: James Johnson, 1792), 400 (song 386).

<sup>3</sup> James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I: 461-462, and III: 1301; Margaret M. Smith and Penny Bouhmela, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, III:1 (London: Mansell, 1986), 102 (BuR 22).

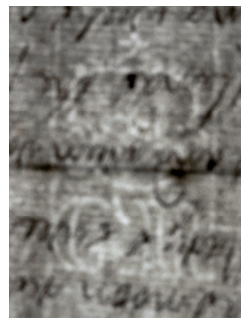
leaf of rough-edged poor-quality laid paper, slightly irregular in shape, measuring approximately 31.5 x 21 cm., which had been professionally conserved before South Carolina acquired it.<sup>4</sup>

There are two indications that Burns was using paper from his Excise



supplies. First, the verso of the leaf has two small red circular stamps, approximately 1.5 cm. in diameter; neither stamp has printed completely, but they appear to read “EXCISE / OFFICE,” round the border, with a lion rampant in the centre. Second, near the middle of the page (which is one half of a full folio

sheet) is a watermark, approximately 5 cm. high by 2.5 cm. wide, with the royal cipher GR surmounted by a crown.



The paper is significant, as a first indication of how formal or final Burns considered the manuscript to be, and also of the kind of reader for whom he had written it. Writing from Ellisland on April 2, 1789, Burns apologized to the Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill for using vile paper, stained with the sanguinary scores of ‘thae curst horse leeches o’ the’ Excise,’ ... wretched paper, which was originally intended for the venal fist of some drunken Exciseman, to take dirty noters in a miserable vault of an Ale-cellar.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, when he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop in early February, also from Ellisland, he boasted that he had

rummaged every Stationer’s shop in Dumfries, for a long and broad, ample and capacious, sized sheet of writing paper, just to keep by me for epistles to you; and you see my dear Madam, by this honest-looking page, that I have succeeded to a miracle (*Letters*, I: 369: February 5, 1789).

That letter to Mrs. Dunlop included Burns’s fair-copy (untitled) transcript of “Afton Braes,” while the new manuscript appears from its paper to be an earlier less formal version, still in the process of final polishing, rather than designed for presentation.

The chief evidence for placing the Roy manuscript early in the manuscript sequence is textual. At four points it has readings that are deleted and replaced with ones that match the next manuscript from the

<sup>4</sup> This was the second time the manuscript had been conserved: the 1979 auction description (in n. 10 below) describes it as “laid down,” or inlaid in a mount.

<sup>5</sup> G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I: 390.

Afton Braes — *Time Banks of Fairy* —  
 How gently, dear Afton, among thy green braes,  
 And grateful I'll sing thee a song in thy praise;  
 My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream,  
 Flow gently, dear Afton, disturb not her dream. —  
 How ~~pleasant~~ <sup>lovely</sup> those hills which echo round through the glen,  
 How ~~pleasant~~ <sup>lovely</sup> that chant in your wild throng den,  
 Thou green-crofted floor thy vexinging folk;  
 I charge you disturb not my slumbering folk. —  
 How lofty, dear Afton, thy neighbouring hills,  
 How marshy with the currents of dear winding rills,  
 There daily I wander, as moss rises high,  
 My flock and my Mary's sweet cot in my eye. —  
 How pleasant thy banks and green valleys below,  
 Where wild in the woodlands the primroses blow;  
 There oft we mild evening walks over the lea,  
 The sweet-ranted lark <sup>trilled</sup> ~~trilled~~ my Mary & me. —  
 Thy crystal stream, Afton, how lovely it glides  
 And winds by the cot where my Mary resides:  
 How wanton thy ~~current~~ <sup>water</sup> ~~current~~ <sup>water</sup> her easy feet laves,  
 As gathering sweet flowers into whelms thy pure waves.  
 How gently, dear Afton, among thy green braes,  
 How gently, sweet gives the theme of my lays,  
 My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream,  
 Flow gently, dear Afton, disturb not her dream.

Robert Burns, Autograph Manuscript of "Afton Braes" (G. Ross Roy Collection)  
 purchased in memory of G. Ross Roy (1924-2013)  
 Courtesy of the Irvin Department of Rare Books & Special Collections,  
 University of South Carolina Libraries

sequence, and at all other points of variants its readings match the earlier, rather than published, text. The collation below records variants from the Roy manuscript (R), in a single sequence with variants from other texts as noted by Kinsley. Kinsley used these sigla: *SMM*, the text as published in the *Scots Musical Museum*; and *Loch*, the Lochryan MS that Burns sent to Mrs. Dunlop, in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.<sup>6</sup> Kinsley's policy was to note only significant variants: where no record is included below for a variant reading in *Loch*, it means only that the *Loch* reading is not in Kinsley, not that *Loch* necessarily agrees with *SMM*. In the collation below I have used the Wallace edition to record additional variants, and marked such places *Loch(W)*. The only variants Kinsley records from the other two sources (the Afton Lodge MS, in the Burns Birthplace Museum, and the transcript in the Hastie MSS, in the British Library) are in the title; the collation below lists further variants from the Afton Lodge MS, chiefly of presentation, based on the Birthplace Museum's digitization.<sup>7</sup>

- Title:** Afton Water *SMM*] Afton Braes – Tune Banks of Tay *Roy*;  
Sweet Afton – A Song *Afton*, *Hastie transcript*  
**1** sweet *SMM*, *Afton*] clear *Roy*, *Loch*  
**2** Flow gently *SMM*, *Afton*] And grateful *Roy*, *Loch*  
**4** sweet *SMM*, *Afton*] clear *Roy*, *Loch*  
**5** stock dove *Roy inserted*, *Loch*, *SMM*] blackbird *Roy*, *deleted*; stock-  
dove *Loch (W)*, *Afton*  
**6** wild whistling blackbirds *SMM*] linnets that chant *Roy*, *deleted*;  
blackbirds that chant *Roy inserted*, *Loch*; wild-whistling  
Blackbirds *Afton*  
yon thorny den *SMM*, *Afton*] wild thorny den *Roy*, *Loch*  
**7** green crested lapwing *SMM*] green crested plover *Roy*, *Loch*; green-  
crested plover *Loch(W)*; green-crested Plover *Afton*  
**9** sweet *SMM*, *Afton*] clear *Roy*, *Loch*  
**10** Far mark'd *Roy*, *SMM*, *Afton*] Far-mark'd *Loch(W)*  
clear, winding *SMM*, *Afton*] clear-winding *Roy*, *Loch(W)*  
**16** sweet scented *Roy*, *SMM*, *Afton*] sweet-scented *Loch(W)*  
shades *Roy inserted (alternative)*, *SMM*, *Loch (W)*, *Afton*] hides *Roy*  
*original (not deleted)*  
**17** chrystal *SMM*] crystal *Roy*, *Loch (W)*, *Afton*

<sup>6</sup> The Lochryan MS is part of Burns's letter to Mrs. Dunlop, February 5, 1789 (*Letters*, I: 369-371), printed in William Wallace, ed., *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop; Correspondence Now Published for the First Time, with Elucidations* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), 142-145 (p. 143). Wallace included the song text (but generally normalized manuscript idiosyncrasies), and though Roy recollated the letter against the Morgan manuscript, the editorial policy of the *Letters* did not print texts of the poems or songs that Burns included in letters.

<sup>7</sup> MS: "Sweet Afton – a Song," Object no. 3.6215, Burns Birthplace Museum: [http://www.burnsmuseum.org.uk/collections/object\\_detail/3.6215.j](http://www.burnsmuseum.org.uk/collections/object_detail/3.6215.j).

- 19 waters *Roy inserted, Loch(W), SMM, Afton*] current *Roy, deleted*  
     lave *SMM, Loch (W), Afton*] laves *Roy*  
 20 clear *SMM, Afton*] pure *Roy, Loch*  
     wave *SMM, Loch(W), Afton*] waves *Roy*  
 21 sweet *SMM, Afton*] clear *Roy, Loch*  
 22 River *SMM, Afton*] river *Roy, Loch(W)*  
 24 sweet *SMM, Afton*] clear *Roy, Loch*

Kinsley concluded from the variants between the Lochryan text and the text in the *Scots Musical Museum* that Lochryan, though a fair copy of a finished song, was the earliest version of those available to him. It will readily be seen from the collation above that the Roy manuscript discussed here is one stage earlier still; in each instance where Roy has a substantive difference from *Loch* (i.e. lines 5, 6, 16, 19), Burns has made an insertion in *Roy* that matches *Loch*, his subsequent fair copy for Mrs. Dunlop.

Even though the Roy Collection manuscript has not previously been known to or used by Burns scholars, its provenance stretches back to the early nineteenth century. Accompanying it at the auction was a torn sheet of fragile brown paper (perhaps a previous wrapper or picture-backing), transcribed below, which dates from the early twentieth century and suggests that the manuscript had been given by Burns to Graham of Fintry, and thereafter passed down through a series of Graham relatives.

The two Robert Burns' M/S Afton Water (an early version) and 'The battle of Sheriffmuir' (final version for the Kilmarnock Edition) were bequeathed to my Great Grandfather Robert Graham Fletcher, in 1832 by Dr Robert Graham of Edinburgh.

I think the reason & sequence is that they originally belonged to Robert Graham of Fintry (R.B.s patron & friend) Elizabeth Graham was R.G.F.'s mother, Dr. R.G. thought that RGF was the most suitable heir.

All part of the mixture of F's & Grahams in late XVIII century.

A. Fletcher

There are, of course, several problems with this account, most notably that "The Battle of Sherra-moor" was not published in Burns's Kilmarnock edition, but first in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 3 (1790), and then in final, revised form, as "The Battle of Sheriff-Muir," in Currie's edition of 1800 (Kinsley II: 534-536). Burns's revised manuscript for "Battle of Sheriff-Muir," which was acquired from a Washington D.C. dealer in 2009 by the National Library of Scotland, was marked to show it was the manuscript used by Currie, which, if it had been given by Burns to Graham of Fintry, raises the question of how it got from Graham to Currie and back into the Graham family. Since the paper on which the "Afton Braes" manuscript was written is so evidently Excise paper, it seems unlikely Burns would have chosen it to present to



Graham of Fintry, his superior and patron in his Excise career. Moreover, the "Afton Braes" manuscript had left the Graham-Fletcher family well before A. Fletcher wrote his note. Nonetheless, the provenance note has at least the ring of a slightly-mangled family story that hands down a kernel of historical truth.

The two Robert Burns m/s  
 1. Afton Braes (an early version)  
 and 'The battle of Sheriff-Muir' (final  
 version for the Kilmarnock edition)  
 were bequeathed to my great grandfather  
 Robert Graham Fletcher, in 1832  
 by Dr Robert Graham (Edinburgh).  
 I think the reason a bequest  
 is that they originally belonged to  
 Robert Graham of Fintry (R.B.'s patron  
 & friend) & Elizabeth Graham (nee  
 R.G.F.'s mother, Dr R.G.F.  
 thought that R.G.F. was of 2  
 most suitable heir.  
 All part of the mixture of F's & Graham  
 in late XVIII Century

A. J. Fletcher

Provenance note for "Afton Braes" and "The Battle of Sheriff-Muir"  
 G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries



By the late 1850s, however, there is much surer documentation. In July 1859, at the Surrey Archeological Society's annual meeting in Richmond, a London lawyer and manuscript collector, Robert Cole, F.S.A., exhibited "a poem by Burns, in his own handwriting, while he was an officer of Excise, entitled 'Afton Braes'."<sup>8</sup> Two years later, on July 29, 1861, just a few months after the major sale of William Pickering's Burns manuscripts in May, Coles's collection also went to the same London auction house, Puttick and Simpson, and the manuscript of "Afton Braes" sold for just £3 6s.<sup>9</sup>

Then silence. The manuscript was apparently unknown to any of the great late nineteenth-century editors, Scott-Douglas, Wallace, Henley and Henderson, as also to such later scholars as James C. Dick and James Kinsley. It emerged again briefly at auction, in 1979, at Sotheby's, simply as "the property of a lady," when it was bought by the firm of Bernard Quaritch, and then once more disappeared into private ownership.<sup>10</sup> It would be another twenty-six years till it would reemerge in April 2013, in a major auction at Bonham's, of autograph poetic manuscripts from the collection of the London-based dealer Roy Davids, when it was purchased for the University of South Carolina.<sup>11</sup>

As noted when the acquisition was announced, the University was particularly pleased to acquire a manuscript of this specific Burns song for the Roy Collection. While Burns first wrote his song to the air "Banks o' Tay," that tune would soon be displaced for most Burns lovers in the United States by another tune, written for Burns's words in 1837 by Jonathan Spilman (1812-1896), a law student in Kentucky, and subsequently a presbyterian minister.<sup>12</sup> In 1911, when George Armstrong Wauchope (1862-1943), a Scots-Virginian brought up in Afton, Virginia, wrote the University of South Carolina's first *alma mater*, he wrote it in

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<sup>8</sup> *Surrey Advertiser* (Tuesday, July 12, 1859), 7; cf. *Surrey Comet* (Saturday July 9, 1859), 4, where the manuscript is described as "the original draft of Burns's 'Afton Braes'."

<sup>9</sup> Puttick and Simpson, July 29, 1861, lot 237; selling price reported in *Dublin Evening Mail* (Tuesday, August 13, 1861), 1. The only other Burns lot in the Coles sale, a collection of Excise documents, fetched £5 5s.

<sup>10</sup> *Catalogue of Valuable Autograph Letters, Literary Manuscripts and Historical Documents ... March 13-14, 1979* (London: Sotheby's, 1979), 262-263 (lot 308). The private owner was D.C.C. Wilson (Roy Davids, as in n. 11 below).

<sup>11</sup> *The Roy Davids Collection, Part III Poetry: Poetical Manuscripts & Portraits of Poets, vol. I: A-K, April 10, 2013* (London: Bonham's, 2013), 88-89 (lot 79); in the same sale, the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, bought "Nanie's Awa" (lot 80).

<sup>12</sup> Earl Reese Hoover, "J.E. Spilman, Kentucky's long-lost composer," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 66:3 (1968): 222-241.

the meter of Burns's song but of course for Spilman's tune.<sup>13</sup> It is a tribute to Burns's extraordinary transatlantic influence that Wauchope's words, sung by thousands of Carolinians each year at graduations and football games, still carry the heading in printed programs "Tune: Flow gently, sweet Afton," acknowledging Burns's song as Wauchope's inspiration more than a century after its first publication.

In addition to the illustrations here, the University of South Carolina Libraries have made available, through the Libraries' Digital Collections, a high-quality digital image that can be enlarged for closer scholarly examination, along with images of other Burns manuscripts in the Roy Collection and of Burns-related chapbooks, newspapers, and other texts.<sup>14</sup>

*University of South Carolina*

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<sup>13</sup> Wauchope's copy is inserted in the Irvin Department copy of his *Writers of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: the State, 1910).

<sup>14</sup> See <http://digital.tcl.sc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/rbc/id/3119/rec/2>; the entry page for other digitized Burns and Scottish digital items in the Roy Collection is: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/sldp/sldp.html>.